DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 153 115 CG 012 364

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TITLE Support Services and Aged Blacks.
PUB DATE 19 Nov 77
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the Gerontological Society (29th, New York, N.Y., October, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; *Blacks; *Family Relationship; Financial Needs; *Helping Relationship; Living Standards; Marital Status; *Older Adults; Research Projects; Social Relations; *Social Services

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study assesses the sources from which elderly blacks draw support for needed services. A total of 208 elderly blacks were questioned concerning whom they would turn to for companionship, when feeling depressed, when in need of necessities like food or medicine, and in emergency situations. For each area, respondents indicated whether they called on children, spouse, sister, brother, friend, neighbor, or others (such as agencies, institutions, clergymen or social workers). It was found that, like most other Americans, aged blacks depend greatly on their families, especially their children. Community resources are often underutilized, even in cases where they are needed to ease the strain on the family of caring for the aged person. It is not clear whether society is failing to provide needed support, or whether aged blacks voluntarily refrain from taking advantage of it. (Author/EP)

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# SUPPORT SERVICES AND AGED BLACKS

For Presentation To

The 30th Annual Scientific Meeting
Of the Gerontological Society

November 19, 1977

San Francisco, California

by

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This is an exploratory study to assess to what extent elderly Blacks call on: family, friends, neighbors, public or private institutions and professionals to provide them with major support services. The main focus of the study, however, is to ascertain what particular people and the extent to which they provide widowed and retired aged Blacks with major support.

The support systems of the retired and widowed are of major interest because both widowhood and retirement promote alienation from meaningful family and work roles. The alienation is closely tied to the frequent decline in income after retirement and through the general decline in other roles (Rosow, 1974). Lopata (1973) argues that widows, in particular, have a problem maintaining their social life and standard of living because the loss creates a financial problem.

In relation to the role of worker, Simpson & McKinney (1964) assert that retirement undercuts the major social supports of an individual by removing him from the world of work in which his supports are rooted. Looking at both the effect of retirement and widowhood, Blau (1974) reports that both have isolating effects on the individual in old age, with retirement having the stronger effect. She further asserts that when comparing the social participation of the retired and employed with the married and widowed, greater differences are found among the former than the latter.

The Research Problem

Considering that both widowhood and retirement sever social ties, lessen support systems, and undercut stability in one's life, to whom

then do older people turn for emotional, social and financial support, when customary marital or work roles have been disrupted? And more specifically, to whom do widowed and retired Black elderly persons turn for support?

Research findings point out that the family, unlike any other institution, is where the elderly look for support, especially from their children (Brody, 1966). Adams (1970) asserts that widows in particular depend on their children. Neugarten (1975) points out that the majority of old people want and seek independence, when at all possible, but when this cannot be accomplished, they generally expect support from their children.

The Sample

The information in this study is a part of a larger study in which a systematic sample of 208 elderly Blacks were studied to better understand their attitudes about retirement home living. The respondents were chosen from a list of about three-fourths of the 1,100 elderly people in the town where the study was conducted. The names and addresses of the respondents were obtained through Model Cities, the Community Action Program, local churches, and senior citizen social organizations.

The sample includes 102 men and 106 women with a median age of 71 years. The majority of the respondents, ninety-six percent, are protestants. Their modal category of education is between six and nine years of school. Although the majority of the subjects' level of education falls in the above mentioned category, a sizeable

proportion, thirty-six percent, of them attended or graduated from college. The typical income category of the respondents is between $5,000-7,999 per year with social security benefits as their major source of income.

The marital status of the respondents reflects the general characteristics of the elderly population in our society. As a result, there are over twice as many married men as women in the sample, fifty-eight and twenty-two percent, respectively. Also, there are almost twice as many widowed women as men. Sixty-seven percent of the women, as opposed to only thirty-seven percent of the men, are widowed. A small percentage of both men and women are either divorced, separated or never married, only five to fifteen percent.

The employment status of the respondents also reflects the common characteristics among the aged population in our society-more of them are retired than employed. Of the elderly included in this sample, sixty-five percent are retired, thirty-seven percent are employed and thirty-nine percent are housewives.

Support Assessment Questions

Four major questions were used to assess the type of support aged Blacks receive and who provides this support. The following are the questions used in the study:

(1) When you want to talk to someone for companionship, who do you call on?

(2) When feeling sad, blue or depressed, who do you usually talk with?

(3) When in need of help with buying basic necessities like food, clothing, or medicine, who do you ask for help?

(4) Whenever you have emergencies, who do you call on?

For each of the above questions, respondents indicated whether they call on their: spouse, children, sister, brother, friend, neighbor or others for support. Others are defined here as any public or private agencies or institutions and professionals such as doctors, clergymen, or social workers.

The above questions were only asked if respondents indicated that they often to sometimes feel the need to talk with someone for companionship, experience depression or sadness, need help with buying basic necessities, and/or have emergencies in which they need help.

Findings

As is shown in Table I, widowed elderly Blacks turn most frequently to their children for companionship in contrast to the married who call on their spouse for this need. The figures are fifty-three percent and thirty percent, respectively. Siblings are mentioned with approximately the same frequency by both married and widowed respondents as being called on for companionship. Both friends and neighbors are called on more by the widowed (forty-six versus thirty-four percent) than the married as a source of companionship. There is no difference between how often others are called on to provide both married and widowed respondents with companionship. Both groups indicated they call on others about fourteen percent of the time.

When feeling sad or depressed the widowed respondents said they call on their children more often than the married (forty-four versus twenty-six percent). There is very little difference between how often the widowed and married call on a sister when feeling sad or

depressed. Brothers among the married are never called on for this support, but eighteen percent of the widowed call on a brother. Both married and widowed respondents call on friends and neighbors with about the same frequency when feeling sad or depressed; however, neighbors are called on a little more often by the widowed respondents. A small percentage of both married and widowed respondents say they call on "others" when feeling sad or depressed.

In terms of financial assistance, a large percentage of both widowed and married people call on their children for support. However, widowed people call on their children more often for financial support than the married, sixty-five percent versus fifty-eight percent, respectively. The respondents vary only slightly in frequency with which they call on either sister, brother, friend or neighbor for financial assistance. A sizeable proportion, thirty-three percent, of the married subjects as opposed to only nineteen percent of the widowed seek financial support from public or private institutions.

During emergencies, as would be expected, a high percentage, sixty percent, of the married subjects say they call on their spouse. The widowed respondents mentioned calling on their children, seventy-one percent, more than anyone else during emergencies. Both the married and widowed subjects call on their siblings with about the same frequency when experiencing an emergency. There is very little difference between how often friends are called on by the married and widowed subjects (sixteen versus twenty-one percent). However, about one-fourth of the widowed respondents, compared to seven percent of

the married, call on a neighbor during emergencies. Both groups seldom call on "others," between two and five percent, during emergencies.

As findings in Table II reveal, employed respondents differ from retired respondents in regards to who they choose to talk with for companionship. Only a little over a third of the retired talk to their spouse compared to fifty-six percent of the employed. Children and friends are called on a little over forty percent of the time by both groups. Sisters, unlike brothers, are called on about a third of the time for companionship. Brothers are called on for this support only twelve percent of the time. There is no major difference between the respondents in how often they call on neighbors for companionship. However, the retired respondents tend to call on "others" more often, nineteen percent of the time, as compared to only three percent of the time for those who are working.

When feeling sad or depressed, both the employed and retired respondents frequently call on their spouse for support, at least forty percent of the time. The retired respondents call on their children almost twice as often as they employed, forty-one versus twenty-three percent, when feeling sad or depressed. A great difference also exist between the role or function of siblings when the respondents are feeling sad or depressed. Sisters, unlike brothers, are called on more often. Friends play a significant part when older working people need support to counter depressed feelings. Friends are called on about a third of the time by the working respondents and twenty percent of the time by the retired. Neighbors and "others" are

called on about twenty percent of the time by both the retired and working respondents when feeling depressed. However, neighbors are called on less often, ten percent, of the time by the employed.

When in need of financial assistance both employed and working respondents depend greatly on their spouse for support, at least sixty-five percent of the time. Children are also frequently called on by the respondents, forty-six percent of the time by the employed and forty-two percent by the retired. There is not much difference in how often siblings are called on for financial support. Friends are also called on with about the same frequency by both the employed and retired. Neighbors are never asked for financial help by the working respondents and only five percent of the time by the retired. However, almost twice as many of the retired respondents seek financial assistance from others as compared to those who are working (twenty-nine versus fifteen percent).

During emergencies both the employed and retired respondents depend greatly on their families. The employed respondents overwhelmingly call on their spouse at this time as compared to the retired subjects, sixty-nine and forty-one percent, respectively. Both groups call on children for assistance during emergencies, at least fifty percent of the time. Sisters are called on twice as often as brothers, while friends are called upon with about the same frequency by both categories of respondents during emergencies. Also, there is very little difference between the two groups in their tendency to call on neighbors. None of the employed respondents call on "others"

during emergencies and only five percent of those that are retired do so.

Summary

The findings in this study reveal that regardless of marital and employment status, aged Blacks do indeed have someone to call on for supportive services. The family is the primary source of support. For married elderly Blacks, their spouses are called on more than any other family member to provide support. Among the widowed respondents, their children are overwhelmingly called on to provide major supportive services. However, for those services mentioned in this study, the widowed tend to call on their children more often when experiencing emergencies and when in need of financial assistance.

The primary role of friends and neighbors in the support system is to provide companionship to both the married and widowed respondents in this study. Others such as public or private institutions, doctors, clergymen, and social workers are not called on that often by the married or widowed Blacks to provide them with support. However, an unexpected finding was that about a third of the married respondents call on "others" to provide them with financial assistance.

In regard to the employed and retired respondents in the study, the family is also the major source of support. The retired call on their spouses and children to provide them with basic social, emotional, and financial needs. The employed rely more on their spouses and friends for major support; however, friends are seldom called on to provide them with financial assistance. Siblings, especially sisters, are called on by both employed and retired to

provide companionship more often than any other need.

Neighbors and "others" are seldom called on to provide the employed or retired respondents with major supportive services; however, when "others" are called on, it is most often to provide financial assistance.

Discussion

Jackson (1970) asserts that kinship relations among older Black people display no gross structural and functional differences from those of other Americans. The findings in this study support her assertion as well as other existing findings -- aged people depend greatly on their families, especially their children.

Although aged Blacks and other groups of elderly people seek and expect support from their families, the findings in this study reveal that older Blacks frequently underutilize resources in the community. However, in many instances the elderly and their families need the support of community resources to reduce the potential and actual strain families experience as a result of caring for and/or supporting aged family members.

A crucial question at this point is: "how do we maximize on the resources available to older people?" If we consider family members as resources for the aged, we can better design programs to help them assist the elderly. Such programs can take the form of intergenerational workshops so that elderly parents and their adult children can better understand one another through sharing experiences with other families in similar situations. Day care facilities for older people, which are slowly appearing on our society, could also eliminate

or delay institutionalization and could give adult children free time to pursue their interests and goals. Another resource that could be further utilized in the Black community to support the elderly and their families, is the church. Traditionally, the Black church has been, and is to a lesser extent today, the focal point of social interaction in the Black community. The Black church has also been the major vehicle through which the needs of the elderly are addressed. Therefore, we need to place more emphasis on the use of the Black church in providing services and disseminating information about services that are available to the elderly in our communities.

Future Research

In pursuing this research further, we need to tap more services and support mechanisms of the elderly. Therefore, we can better understand the major roles or functions the family plays in providing support to aged Blacks. Also, further research can help us assess the extent to which the society itself fails to provide support to aged Blacks or if aged Blacks voluntarily do not seek support from the community.

TABLE I

RESPONDENTS CALL ON FOR SUPPORT SERVICES BY MARITAL STATUS*

| WHO BLACK AGED PEOPLE CALL ON | FOR COMPANIONSHIP | | WHEN FEELING SAD OR DEPRESSED | | TO HELP WITH FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE | | DURING EMERGENCIES | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Married | Widowed | Married | Widowed | Married | Widowed | Married | Widowed |
| Spouse | 55% | -- | 52% | -- | 70% | -- | 60% | -- |
| Children | 30% | 53% | 26% | 44% | 58% | 65% | 43% | 71% |
| Sister | 31% | 37% | 24% | 27% | 27% | 26% | 26% | 22% |
| Brother | 11% | 12% | -- | 18% | 12% | 15% | 14% | 13% |
| Friend | 34% | 46% | 24% | 31% | 9% | 9% | 16% | 21% |
| Neighbor | 14% | 35% | 15% | 22% | 4% | 5% | 7% | 35% |
| Others | 14% | 14% | 11% | 15% | 33% | 19% | 2% | 5% |

*Columns do not add up to 100% because respondents gave multiple responses

TABLE II

RESPONDENTS CALL ON FOR SUPPORT SERVICES BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS*

| WHO BLACK AGED PEOPLE CALL ON | FOR COMPANIONSHIP | | WHEN FEELING SAD OR DEPRESSED | | TO HELP WITH FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE | | DURING EMERGENCIES | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Employed | Retired | Employed | Retired | Employed | Retired | Employed | Retired |
| Spouse | 56% | 35% | 47% | 40% | 67% | 65% | 69% | 41% |
| Children | 43% | 40% | 23% | 41% | 46% | 52% | 50% | 59% |
| Sister | 35% | 33% | 19% | 32% | 30% | 27% | 46% | 22% |
| Brother | 12% | 12% | -- | 16% | 17% | 14% | 21% | 10% |
| Friend | 48% | 43% | 33% | 21% | 6% | 10% | 37% | 19% |
| Neighbor | 17% | 24% | 10% | 21% | -- | 5% | 11% | 19% |
| Others | 3% | 19% | 25% | 20% | 15% | 29% | -- | 5% |

*Columns do not add up to 100% because respondents gave multiple responses

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